

08/06/2007

### UK FOOT AND MOUTH OUTBREAK IS A TIMELY REMINDER OF U.S. LIVESTOCK VULNERABILITY

The re-emergence of foot and mouth disease (FMD) in Britain and the publication of a new report by congressional watchdogs on efforts to implement an animal identification system in the United States, should remind farmers and consumers of the vulnerability of the US livestock system to disease outbreaks.

The discovery of Mad Cow in the US in December 2003 led to a shutdown of beef exports costing an estimated \$2 billion. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) estimates that costs of a foot and mouth outbreak could range up to \$27 billion. Those costs and any disease outbreak could be contained with an effective national animal identification program. However, GAO says, despite investing more than \$100 million there is little to show for it.

FMD is highly contagious and can travel on the wind and on farm equipment. As such, speed and accuracy in identifying the location and cause of a disease are critical. Britain discovered that in 2001 when a slow response led to a cull of more than 6.5 million animals at a cost of around \$16 billion. Experts believe Britain is better placed now because since 2001 it has adopted an animal tracking system which it is using to combat the new threat. The British system is mandatory and has a central animal database similar to that adopted by other countries in the European Union. In addition to eartags, all cattle born since 1996 must have a cattle "passport" confirming identification details, including sex, breed, date of birth, identification of the mother and its movement history.

Unfortunately, USDA seems much slower to learn the lessons from our own experiences with disease outbreaks. It is almost 4 years since Mad Cow was first discovered in the U.S. During that time, USDA has requested and received \$117 million in federal funds to establish a National Animal Identification System (NAIS) to provide a 48-hour traceback capability in the event of a disease outbreak. However, it has little to show for it other than confusion and mixed signals. According to the House Agriculture Appropriations Committee report last year:

*“Until August 2005, the Department had stated that the program data would be held centrally; however, the Secretary announced in August that data would be held by private entities .... In addition, the program is voluntary, but there have been mixed signals about participation becoming mandatory in the future.”* House Agriculture Appropriations Report 109-463, March 12, 2006, p. 72

USDA does claim to have registered more than 400,000 premises, which is the first step in developing an effective traceback capability, although Wisconsin has registered 57,000 of those and did it independently of the USDA program through congressionally-directed spending that pre-dates USDA's effort. Further, as the FY07 Agriculture Appropriations report states:

*“Premises identification is a necessary building block, but in itself does not offer any means of animal traceback.”* Ibid.

While Wisconsin's premises ID program was hailed for its pioneering work and declared to be the model for the nation by USDA, implementation of animal identification has proven to be much more challenging due to confusion at USDA about the direction of the program, which the GAO report highlights as a serious impediment to implementing an effective system:

*“USDA has steadily increased the number of livestock premises registered in the nation and taken some steps to address stakeholder concerns in implementing NAIS. However, the agency has not effectively addressed several key issues identified by livestock industry groups, market operators, state animal health officials, and others that, if left unresolved, could undermine the program's goal of rapid and effective traceback and thus hinder its success.”*

*Foremost among these issues is USDA's decision in late 2006 to continue implementing NAIS as a voluntary program and to drop participation benchmarks that were intended to gauge progress.* GAO-07-592 Nat. Animal ID System, July 2007, p. 4

The report accompanying the 2008 Agriculture Appropriations bill had similar concerns:

*After some signals from the Secretary that participation would be mandatory, the program is now voluntary. The NAIS implementation plan released in the Spring of 2006 included a timeline that called for NAIS to be operational by 2007 and fully implemented by 2009. However, in November 2006, APHIS [the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service] released a Draft User Guide for NAIS, which states that the goal of premises registration is to establish a complete record of all locations, or premises, in the United States that manage or hold livestock and/or poultry. According to USDA, because the program is voluntary and the goal can only be reached if producers choose to participate, a date is not specified as to when the goal is expected to be achieved. In addition, it is not clear if the program's original goal of a 48-hour animal trace-back is still part of the plan.* House Agriculture Appropriations Report 110-258, July 24, 2007, p. 43.

After 4 years of planning and implementation during which USDA has spent millions of dollars on NAIS-related activities, including cooperative agreements with states, industry groups and others, we have no assurance that we are any closer to dealing effectively with a disease outbreak. This year, the House Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee said enough:

*The Committee requests a complete and detailed strategic plan for the program, including tangible outcomes, measurable goals, specific milestones, and necessary resources for the entire program. Until the Committee receives this plan, the Committee has no justification to continue funding for this program and therefore, the Committee recommendation includes no new funding.* Ibid.

The GAO report echoes those findings:

*“USDA has awarded \$35 million in NAIS cooperative agreements from fiscal years 2004 through 2006 to 49 states, 29 tribes, and 2 territories to help identify effective approaches to register premises and identify and track animals. However, USDA has not consistently monitored or formally evaluated the results of cooperative agreements or consistently monitored or formally evaluated the results with states, industry groups, and other stakeholders. As a result USDA cannot be assured that the agreements’ intended outcomes have been achieved and, furthermore, that lessons learned and best practices are used to inform the program’s progress.”* Op. cit. Highlights

Wisconsin’s economy depends enormously on its livestock industry and Wisconsin is fortunate in having far-sighted leaders within the agriculture industry who have helped lead the nation towards an animal identification system. However, like all such efforts in the US, it has been undercut by tentative and contradictory actions from USDA. Until USDA addresses the concerns of animal health officials, the livestock industry and livestock producers for an effective animal identification system, the U.S. livestock industry remains at great risk.

# # #

*Dean of the Wisconsin Congressional Delegation, Congressman Dave Obey represents Wisconsin’s 7th Congressional District and serves as the Chairman of the House Appropriations Committee. He can be reached by visiting his web site at <http://www.Obey.House.Gov> , or by calling his Congressional office at 715 842-5606*